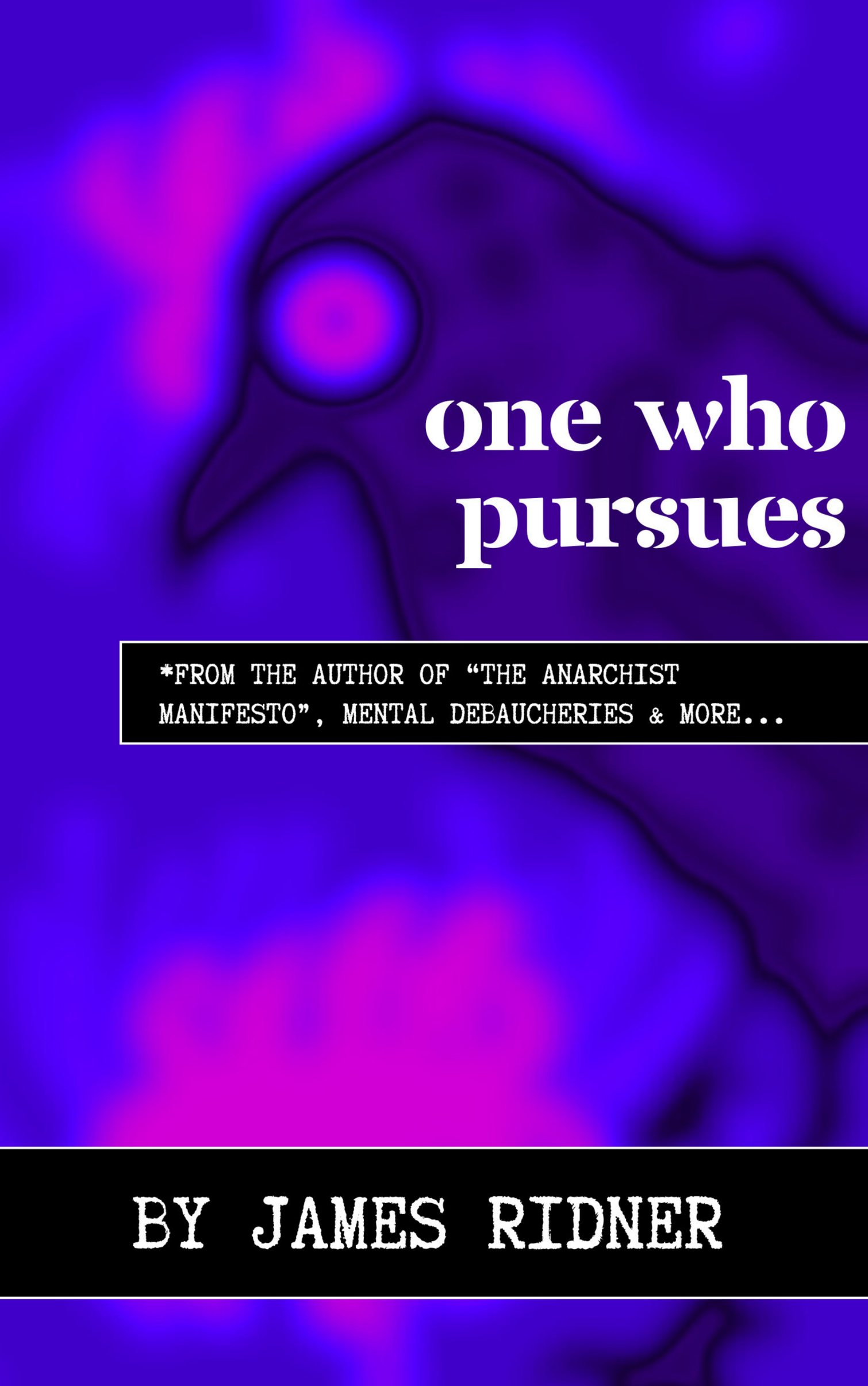

one who pursues

*FROM THE AUTHOR OF “THE ANARCHIST MANIFESTO”, MENTAL DEBAUCHERIES & MORE...

BY JAMES RIDNER

CH.1

one who pursues

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Chapter One:

THE NIGHT MEETING

Something was far off in the distance, avoiding the rowdy howls but closely observing the grey smoke that rose from the lips of some rowdy teenagers sitting in a circle around a warm, tender fire. The thing's small, thin feet rested on—and its toes curled around—a beige tree branch that extended a couple of yards out in the perpendicular direction of the fire. The odor of the tender charcoal burning from the overwhelming embers reached the thing, prompting a bothered response to the stimuli. It departed the branch to parts unknown not long after

Those fiendish bastards.

Maxwell tensed up as the meth coursed through his veins. His light brown t-shirt converged into his petite chest, while his sober jeans tightened around the crotch area. He was the one with the pipe of meth in hand, making an effort to enjoy the idyllic fire and inviting the nightly breeze into his eternally cold heart—but it instead brought further discomfort.

"Shouldn't we, uh, do more than spout threats at the Suttons'?" Darius questioned—without a hint of idleness.

The others, Weston, Paisley, and Maxwell, discerned a stubborn frown on Darius's acne-infested and greasy face.

Maxwell, as he is the one who leads the band of teens, promptly responded: "Why yes, Darius, I thought it was necessary to address this hindrance at tonight's meeting—with all involved.

"As the Grizzly Riders, the foes of the Black Paragon, we needn’t empower them into overthrowing us. We know by now the townsfolk, rather than join us in arms, surrender to the cult for their safety—and the rewards they offer. It's becoming patent by now that this is ignorance at its

finest; they shamelessly steal the innocence of us and other families and refuse to admit to their wrongdoings."

The others are acquainted with the consequences associated with the Black Paragon's actions: Weston and Paisley have to deal with a mother who lost all sensibility and became mad after her loss, and Darius has to deal with the burden of not having a mother—instead, having a drunkard for a father.

We must continue to struggle for the sake of our blissful future, Maxwell reasoned.

Maxwell resumed as the flames of the fire burned more vigorously: "What we will see in giving them the taste of their own medicine is a better tomorrow for us, and I daresay, for the townsfolk of Canterbrook. Bear in mind that you all mustn't run from this timely opportunity; otherwise, the Sutton's and other Black Paragon members will make you their puppet—that alone sends shivers down my spine."

Maxwell approached Darius, sitting slouched on the other end of the fire, and in a solemn resonance not all different from his usual one, asked Darius: "Hey there, Darius. Are you ready to thrust your mighty wrath on the people who caused you and the rest of us so much misery? I know your dear Ma would want her revenge for the ones who stole her kind spirit from this world. Come on, Darius, drop the pacifism for once. Please? For your friends."

Darius felt a chill run through his dark skin as he glared intensely at Maxwell, looking back at the horrid memory he so longed to forget; he was powerless and could only muster spite—albeit far lesser than the spite felt by the others.

Maxwell agreed with his sentiments and asserted: "Now that I discussed the preliminary details, we must also consider our modus operandi. I'd like to hear all opinions, so let your imaginations run wild."

Weston, who was a few yards away from Maxwell, returned: "How 'bout we lynch 'em? I'm sure good 'ole Darius over there would like dat, wouldn't ya—"

Weston paused and observed Darius pointing his head down, trying to ignore that raging word: **lynch**.

Fuck. Overstepped my boundaries, Weston said to himself. He paid heed and said no more to the boy lost in melancholy.

"How about we shoot them instead? Shotgun? A rifle? Whatever is deemed vital by you, Maxwell—to make the operation more or less trouble-free," Paisley suggested.

Weston morphed his mellow visage into one full of peeve. *Is she fucking serious?*

He argued: "Sis, are ya hearing yerself right now? It's ludicrous to give those fuckheads a painless death. I swear, ya better not—"

"My idea is needed to succeed, Wes," she shouted. "For once, will you not give in to those emotions, please?"

Fucking hell, eh? Ugh. She sure is a know-it-all. Sheesh, sis ain't grasp the situation at hand. She's too damn easy on peeps. But even so, all we got is one another.

The boy turned his eyes to the sky, where the moon was at its peak, as all the insects chanted louder and more frequently than mere minutes ago; the hour of midnight was upon them.

"I'll have to agree with Paisley's suggestion," Darius said nervously.

An uncomfortably tense silence occurred, where Darius caught Maxwell coming off as unimpressed—denoted by the grimace on his face, Paisley benevolently smiling back at him, and Weston more or less tensing up on the edge of the wooden log he sat on.

Those fiendish bastards.

Maxwell handed Weston the pipe of meth, which had been in his hand for a little while. Eventually, Weston was able to settle down again.

Come on, Darius, drop the pacifism for once. Please? For your friends.

What a group, heh, Maxwell mused to himself.

"First off, Paisley always seems to refrain from getting her hands dirty—something that only forbids us from our goal. Even though it soured Darius, Wes's idea is better in every way. Augh, I can't stop remembering the clamorous cries—which still echo in my ears—of that harrowing night last year."

Those fiendish bastards.

As the glaring fire roared with violence, Weston suggested: "Then how 'bout we, ya 'now, set their fucking crib ablaze, heh? Wouldn't it be lovely to watch 'em burn?"

The teens, with their dense, widened pupils, eyeballed him with amusement, just before he handed the pipe of meth back to Maxwell.

"Excellent idea, Wes!" Maxwell replied. "That's quite the scheme, and with this, the fall of the Black Paragon assured, while they burn in the inferno of both our loathing and their very own towards us 'till Hell pays them a visit, haha."

The spirits of the teens hence spiraled malignantly on hearing those words. Maxwell's and Weston's spirits, especially, were aroused further by the meth streaming through their body—everything appeared to be prepped for tomorrow.

Against Darius and Paisley's recommendation of a more passive alternative, Maxwell announced: "In this circumstance, since more of you side with arson, that will be our modus operandi."

They'll be in despair, haha!!!

"What we need for tomorrow is supplies for burning a building—not to mention the opportunity to break inside sneakily, but we know why it will be grueling. Those townsfolk practically idolize them as prophets and would alert them of intruders, if we went head-on without playing carefully."

Could they be onto us already, hiding in the vicinity? Maybe in the bushes? Or they could have heard everything? Fuck! Wrapping up this conversation for tomorrow would be best. Could be a ploy. There has to be something; I can feel it lurking around us far off somewhere.

Maxwell stood up from his seat on the wooden log by the fire, hastily lit out the pipe of meth, and put his frail hands in his shabby pockets, gawking at a strange presence that billowed in the fire—and felt cut off from this world.

It has to be that: the thing in the fire must be bothering me. It's such a despairing sensation. Oh God.

Thus far, the presence had been keen on reaching closer to his conceited but troubled soul.

Maxwell clenched his yellow, rotten teeth with little enamel and begged the dreadful spirit to go away—to go far away from him.

Moments later, it vanished into oblivion. Thus, Maxwell considered it to be nothing more than fatigue from his heavy smoking; the others didn't seem frightened by it either.

"Hey, uh. It's getting dark," Maxwell said—under a bewildering constraint. "Um, could we please continue this in the morning? Please? This shit I smoked is making me paranoid over everything. Not like it hasn't happened to me before."

That fucking thing—it will fucking return. I know it will.

Hearing this, the other teens understood Maxwell's paranoia; they had dealt with it many times before, and this was no different from the other instances.

The night became restless: the crickets chirped louder, the luminous stars glimmered with jolly, and the wind rippled with force. The teens simultaneously rose from their seats on the logs; already, they were prepared to head home.

"Are ya 'kay, my man?" Weston questioned.

"Oh, no no... don't worry about me," Maxwell promptly responded. "It's just the meth-induced paranoia we all get, heh. I'm just tired; I'll sleep it off soon."

He tried to imagine the new tomorrow that awaited him and the others. Meanwhile, the dark abyss where that presence originated followed him.

Our fears can't take over us provided we look towards our ambition, or else the Suttons and townsfolk will have the upper hand—those conniving pricks.

Such a despairing sensation.

"Well then, 'guess we outta get outta here, sis," Weston insisted to Paisley.

Darius passively responded, "Hey, me too. Um. You see, my father would be enraged if I were to go past my curfew of 1:00—it's already 12:50 at night. I would rather not get smacked in the head with a bottle of his cheap rum and have him send me outside to sleep with the wild animals. I do not like the wolves that prey on me all night. But, uh, thanks, though, Maxwell. I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

The moonlight and stars illuminated the brownish grass, littered with animal feces, sly spiders, and insects, among other natural wonders, as they paved the way to the teens' modestly sized homes along Timber Street, a mere five-minute walk from their location. The houses in their neighborhood were rundown and old, with an odd presence—similar to the earlier one—emitting from them, as if an invisible foreign entity was roaming the neighborhood, but nobody could see whatever it was—not even a silhouette of it.

The croak of a shadowy bird, obscured by the night sky, infiltrated the teens' ears, while the streetlights flickered like Morse code, and the ambiance prevailed as the only sound.

Maxwell reached his middle-class brick home, which had tall, thick grass a couple of yards in height and dead hickory trees slumped towards the ground. The timber front door, vacant of exterior decor, opened outwards with Maxwell's father's hand.

He's wired on meth, Maxwell thought. This assumption was due to a bag his old man was carrying; it contained a crystallized white substance cut into shards. Maxwell could only observe his old man shouting something without sound—excluding the nightly ambiance—but Maxwell eventually discerned more words, phrases, and hollers the closer he got to the doorstep.

Under closer inspection, his old man was entirely disheveled. He was wearing a torn, all-white T-shirt, baggy jeans lazily pulled up to his waist, and eyes that widened ominously as he stared at him, as if his father were in a trance.

His father shouted: "Boy! What in the hell is the meaning of this, huh? HUH?"

Maxwell tried to conjure an excuse under the pressure—something ordinary for him—but his old man quickly interrupted.

"For fuck's sake, I told ya to be here by 1:00 SHARP! Fucking 1:00 SHARP!! Hey, ya listening, boy? Look at the fucking time now: it's 2:30. Explain this shit now. Now! Or I will beat the shit out of ya like no tomorrow. Ya should know this by now, isn't that right, boy? It's been a while since you got some good marks on your body from yours truly.

"Let me take a guess: You're late because ya screwed that whore, Paisley, right? Yeah, Wes's sister—that retarded shit who thinks he's hot stuff, right, heh? You know that Paisley whore is using

ya like all whores do—especially yer fucking mother. They're both stuck-up wenches. Fucking retards, hehe."

Some force coercively restrained the uneasy boy from answering, because he knew he was despondent. Seeing his vulnerable state, his father, with rage, ranted:

"Huh? Hey, what is with that fucking trembling? Are you scared, hehe?"

He punched Maxwell right in the face and caused him to fall swiftly to the ground. A loud thud thundered, and soft whimpering came from the boy. *It's all fucking hopeless,* the boy thought.

"Hey ya fucker, get up. Are you just going to sit there and do nothing, like your indolent, harlot of a mother? Are ya planning on fighting back? Haha, what a pitiful piece of shit. You dare believe I'm some discount observer who can't see through you. I can't fathom yer stupidity sometimes, boy. Ya remind me an awful lot of yer fruity brother, living with yer licentious mother, who merely spends his days selling his body. He's a dirty queer only to spite me. He's a bad example and a disgrace to our family. I don't have an inkling of where they are now, but I can only assume they are drowning in lethargy and primal lust instead of contributing to society. God damn libertines. I work every fucking day, and they just sit around in pools of cash they got from marketing their bodies. FUCK THEM FOR EVERYTHING!

"Yer bitchy mother didn't even have any physical assets that got my rocks off, hehe. She's as useless as they come, haha."

Clenching his fist tightly, wanting to beat his belligerent father to a bloody pulp, Maxwell slowly tried to move upstairs to escape the brewing storm downstairs. Amid his walk, he ruminated:

God, that man is such a revolting bastard; he's no human but a drugged-up beast. Dammit all! If only the time would come when he would get back the memories of distress from what the Black Paragon did to us, then maybe life would be easier again. Afterward, I could help him get off his drug habit—the only thing currently that gives him pleasure in life. Perhaps, one day, his humanity would—

THUMP! The noise, near his eardrums and accompanied by swift stamps closing in, caught the boy off guard and caused him to tumble down the endless stairs to the fourth step forcefully. Reality then dashed his hopes that his father would break free from the depths of despair.

"Ow… Ouch! Fucking hell!" Maxwell cried with tears. "Why the fuck would you do that, fucking—"

"Hold it, boy. Ya weren't fucking listening to me," his father shouted. "Don't forget the fact that ya broke yer curfew. That means I'll get the belt, the one yer all too familiar with, and smack some sense into ya. No fucking objections, Boy!"

"But dad—"

"Shut it, boy!" he retorted. "Ya fucking listen to me and me alone! To Hell with those retarded friends of yours. All I've seen them do is cause ya more trouble than you want. You are far better than to stoop to their inferior intelligence. They are likely dirty queers, just like yer brother, hehe. Now boy, get yer slow ass over here..."

Maxwell, fed up with his father, did what no other boy his age would attempt, lest they would get harshly punished: he kicked his old man to the tile flooring and knocked him out cold.

Out of fear, he raced upstairs to his room and locked the door, hoping his father would be out cold and forget the entire thing tomorrow—it's all normal though.o him.

The boy passed out in his bed with a torrent of tears and embitterment. *It's all fucking hopeless.* His bed consoled him like a loving mother would a child. Maxwell cherished these instances of serenity, as they reminded him of the days when his family was tightly knit as far as blood could be.

Those fiendish bastards.

Right before he lowered his eyelids to sleep, he briefly wished that only the things from the past would come back. *I miss it all so much.*

The silent sound of the wind inside—although thunderous outside—made for a calming lullaby much like what his mother sang to him as an infant. His bed breathed in the brisk air from outside; this made the boy recall what had happened to his father downstairs. He was terrified of the thought of his father waking up.

He'd probably send me to live with the wolves and shadows that roamed the external world. He fell asleep soundly, wondering how they must be holding up.

That despairing sensation—when will it let up?

Darius approached his working-class abode, which was, like Maxwell's, full of dead Hickory trees in the front and back yard, with uncut sepia-colored grass and fecal matter of deceased wild animals sprinkled haphazardly onto the parched ground. He observed no light seeping through the rectangular windows of his home. The front door was completely open at an almost 90° angle, as if to welcome the boy back home.

He stepped his way inside and went into the living room, only to find a dimly lit lamp resting on the table near the couches. The couches stared fiercely at the lost boy, eager to cuddle him—and his father was passed out on the mahogany armchair a couple of yards from the enthusiastic couches. The potent scent of dried-up booze, with a myriad of empty beer cans, littered the floors of both downstairs and upstairs—excluding Darius's room.

All of this wasn't unusual for the boy, nevertheless, considering his father was widely known by the townsfolk as the town drunk—and a very unruly one. Daily, he adds more cans to his prized assortment; perhaps, he could swim in beer cans if he collects enough.

The boy trudged through the loads of beer cans and reached the kitchen area, which too had its fair share of cans on the floor. He decided to whip up a quick and easy snack: chips.

Maxwell's unimpressed face, Weston's abrupt anger, and Paisley's smile of pity. GAH!

The boy put his hand on the loose bag of potato chips. The bag let out a few that landed on the ground in front of him; the other chips not expelled slumbered calmly inside the bag. He instinctively reached for the one closest to the outside world and gingerly crunched the chip, enjoying the palatable salt sprinkled on it.

Ma once said to him: "Oh dear, you are undoubtedly the brightest spirit I have seen in my life—close to the shining one of granny. I truly hope you remain this way and dismiss the evils of this town; they will torment you incessantly if you decide otherwise, and sooner or later, they will drag you to your grave and compel you to do things you would never picture yourself doing."

Darius broke out into little tears, which soon drifted to his bone-dry lips and brought back a brief amount of life into his soul.

What sublime pain, I suppose.

The boy moved his way to his bedroom for the night. It was located near the kitchen area, only requiring at most fifteen steps to reach it from the end of the kitchen that faced the bedroom. It was no more spacious than eighty square feet—minimal for relief. His bed was simply a bare twin-size mattress draped with dark green and bleached, white blankets. Papers and expired food strewn on the floors. A desk—one that practically took up one-fourth of the room's space—was heaped top-to-bottom with more papers, withered pencils, and dried-up markers.

Fucking hell! Just sleep and forget these emotions like you always do; there's no need for them in these times. I should listen to the others; it isn't always about me, right, Ma?

"Sis, how ya doin'?" Weston asked.

"Fine, I guess." Paisley was in no mood to give emotion to her strung-out brother; she was humiliated yet understanding to some degree.

"What's the matter, sis? Ain’t ya holding back som-thang—”

"Shut your trap! Wes, I don't want to talk when you're another person—under the spell of that evil substance. You wonder why Mother despises—"

"No, ya fucking shuddup! Ain't know nadda, sis. Remember what I said 'while back—don't forget it!"

Will you, for once, free yourself of those emotions? Paisley internally pleaded.

The two reached their house: made of sturdy bricks, untouched windows, and lit by the midnight shadows roaming the streets. Beside the house was an unkempt garden made up of dead flowers—roses, daisies, and sunflowers—and contorted sycamore trees—roughly three to four of them. The dead plants welcomed Weston and Paisley back by sweeping a couple of small leaves their way.

One of the leaves caressed Paisley and whispered: "Come right in, girl. We all love your company, and I assure you that your mother is happy to see you, hehe. Ey, cheer up and enjoy the bliss while you can, heh."

The silhouette of a hunched creature with long, messy hair and claws for hands grasped the

inside door handle and creaked it open, just as Weston and Paisley walked up to the doorstep, and the inexplicable leaves finished their talk and blew back to the garden for much-needed rest.

"Is that you, Glenn?" it asked.

"No, Mother, it's us: Wes and Paisley," Paisley answered.

"Huh? Oh, right! It is you two.

"How dare you show your unsightly faces at my house? HUH?"

"It's not what you may think, Mother!" Paisley replied apprehensively. "We mean no harm. Is that right, Wes?"

"Ugh... easy for ya to say, eh."

Dat right. She ain't deserve special treats. Fucking biyatch, Wes reasoned. The boy held his tongue, however, and allowed his sister to situate things for their sake.

The moon's light illuminated the creature, who was a hideous human being: rumpled, silvery hair that went down to her stomach, thin, flimsy arms and legs, teeth more yellow than the sun (some of which had minuscule cracks), and brown-covered fingernails that extended as far as claws of a witch.

"If you want to come in, you can only sleep in the basement.

"Do you want to know why you are getting that accommodation?

"Because you brats foolishly went past your curfew! For heaven's sake, I was worried sick—as any mother would. Those bad influences and atheists are only corrupting your brains! All you two need in life is your dear mother! Forget those heathens!"

What a biyatch, Weston thought.

"Hey there! What's with the frown, son? Don't tell me you are against your dear mother's wishes."

"Wes, just calm down, please. Smile for Mother. Show her you are at the very least listening," Paisley whispered back.

Weston begrudgingly obliged, with his hands clenched into fists and his feet ready to kick his excuse of a mother right smack in her putrid mug.

"Er... fine, we accept our consequences," Paisley said—not to her delight. Damn that woman.

"Very well, come in, children. You wouldn't want the shadows lurking in the night hours pursuing you, right, hehe?"

They entered the house behind their mother, who grabbed her cane, which was resting on a wall a couple of yards away from them. The rest of the home existed in darkness, except for a faint shadow of a crow visible in the right-most window, atop the sycamore branch four yards backfacing. Weston caught a glimpse, and it flew elsewhere, to parts unknown.

Strange. I swear I saw 'dem shadows of somethang… a bird, I think, near the window. Hm. Hmm? Agh. Must be my imagination.

They reached the door that led to the basement. The handle was frigid, as though it hadn't been opened in years, and had to have been flimsier than spindly rope.

Must be my imagination, Weston repeated.

The old hag gripped it tightly with her tremulous hands you would expect a woman in her sixties to have.

The door creaked open, and the dingy lighting of the living room shone on the wooden steps, showing them what appeared to be cracks all over the steps—identical to the markings an animal would give undergoing torture.

"'Dis place for reeeal giving me spooks," Weston muttered.

The aura of great peril was all too familiar to the venturers of this basement.

Right when Weston and Paisley walked inside, their mother instantly shut the door behind them, and the cramped room's meager lighting vanished before the two.

A locking sound and bestial cackle caught the attention of the two.

“FUCK YA GODDAMN BIYATCH! I'LL FUCKIN' KILL YA 'N MAKE THANGS OUTTA YER GUTS, HAHA!" Weston hollered.

"Wes! Please calm yourself." Paisley asserted. "Just wait 'till morning, and maybe she'll regain her senses like always."

"Fuck dat, sis. Get back inna reality fuckin' sakes."

Paisley crossed her arms and gave him a dirty look. *How hypocritical for a meth junkie like you, Wes.*

"I think I can bust this fucking door open in a matter of minutes, HA! And then that wench will personally get a piece of my fist, HAHA, HAHA... ha... heh."

Typical, typical as usual. Never listens to anyone but himself. How can someone be so selfish? Who knows. I hope he gets taught a lesson for his meth consumption, so he can at the very least be normal again. Maybe?

An hour later, the siblings were resting on the ground almost in a fetal-like position, since there were no blankets or a mattress to sleep on.

Weston was rightfully unsettled by the atmosphere of the lightless room. Like the silhouette he had seen earlier, he could somehow sense the same presence inside the basement with them.

Not this time, 'haps?

With Paisley out cold on the damp, hard floor, Weston whipped out a flashlight he had carried with him to the Grizzly Riders meeting and scanned the entire basement for any signs of life, but to no avail. He could only find the furnace, piled-up old boxes with red stains on the openings, and rundown furniture (chairs, counters, tables, etc.).

Outta be tweakin'. It dat headda yers.

Weston went back to where Paisley was and reclined on a crate several yards from her, but not far enough to be unable to make out her features.

At a snail's pace, he shut his eyes with the notion that a new day was awaiting him and it would be promising.

The future is now in their hands.

Eeeeeeveryooone is ah-sleeeep now, it thought. *I s-shaaaall ah-leeert the o-others beeeefooore d-awwwn.*

It departed from atop one of the sycamore branches that faced the direction parallel to Weston and Paisley's driveway.

The moon moved from its highest point in the sky and shone its radiance upon Timber Street.

The empty street was now a placid paradise, as soon as ambiance took command and allowed the sleeping teens to rest easy—for the time being.

(Words: 4,486)

CH.2

one who pursues

*FROM THE AUTHOR OF “THE ANARCHIST MANIFESTO”, MENTAL DEBAUCHERIES & MORE...

BY JAMES RIDNER

Chapter Two:

THE NEXT DAY

The rays of sunlight slithered above the horizon; however, it was prolonged and menial this morning. It eventually made contact with the roofs in lonely Timber Street. No birds chirping—something was amiss. It was strange. For such a high-traffic vicinity, dawn silence was practically unheard of. Where did the farmers, marching uniformly like ants; the clerks, gazing at their ticking wristwatches; the wage slaves, sulking in their inadequacy; the cops and robbers, playing cat and mouse; and the Black Paragon "suits and ties," circle-jerking to their psychopathies, go?

Winter was fast approaching, and migration was on the rise. There were sensible explanations. However, something was truly off: a bottomless silence engulfed the air. No cars revved, honked, or skidded, which was startling, as this had no good reason. The air itself tells a different story.

It hasn't perched on its branch this morning. Routine and expected, yet the ominous current somehow swept it away. But its presence continued to emanate in every direction, with undying magnitude. A seismic-inducing evil persisted.

Those fiendish bastards.

His mind was blank, brisk, metallic, stone-cold, like the follicles of every wind in a deep abyss one cannot help but look down. The eyes, both—you could see the gray in them—blind as bats, empty beyond black itself—poor boy.

Those fiendish bastards.

Is that all you have for me, internal monologue?

Something clicked—and I remembered vividly: that evil spirit in that accelerant-doused log

pile in that nostalgic pit we dug in that innocent time.

Maxwell lay supine in his bed, with the sheet covering him from pelvis to toe. He had awoken from his slumber, greeted by the eerie silence engulfing Timber Street. He figured something was off, but he couldn't pin the words to it—simply, it had to be something beyond his brain's limited capacity. Although it certainly propelled a vigorous curiosity to investigate it, as it was just too strange to ignore. It wasn't a neighborhood with happy hours to spare in which silence would suffice. *No. It was a bustling street. It must be that thing in the fire,* Maxwell posited. *How could it be explained any other way? That bastard is onto something.*

He removed his sheets, clinging tightly onto him as if recognizing the unsettling atmosphere likewise. His pack of Newports was still in the 9 o'clock direction. He always took this as a sign that he was, in reality, as—for the voracious lucid dreamer he was—it was his "reality check," and it never changed, even by an inch—always in the same spot from which it resided. The chilling air propelled a strong need to begin his morning ritual before breakfast, which afterwards would have been the usual time of preference for the primer death stick of the day.

The clouds eclipsed sun briefly, amid which he lit the end of the death stick with military precision. And this time, it was misdirected twice. *Perhaps, in a brief instant, perturbed by the silent surroundings, I'm feeling like a straitjacketed dog in a white-padded cell?* Maxwell uttered under duress. *Just calm down, son of a bitch.* It was just a thing his mind ought to adjust to.

Those fiendish bastards.

His words escaped between drags from the kindled death stick between his lips. Before long, he grew bored of the same old roaming, and that's when he smothered the butt in the ashtray. Stretching both arms, yawning temperately, he got to the dresser for his choice of outfit today.

Hmm, this shall do, he determined. *First thing in the morning, when the sky is clear and the air is calm, means a fresh start.*

Now, what articles match tranquil morning vibes?

Aha! he interjected, watched by his reflection in the mirror. His collared shirt and most dapper jeans, the shirt's mahogany hue, royal blue jeans, black calf-length socks, and coffee brown beanie, all

of which matched the rest. *A positive result indeed.*

Sigh. Oh, how long it's been since I thought about what I wear.

That reminds me, I wonder how the others are. I'll meet at last night's pit—coffee and breakfast are first. Ah, and come with the pipe and goods for the special occasion.

Darius spawned from slumber in dreary, zombie-like sleep inertia. He coughed, grunted, paused, and wiped his eyelids and lashes of nightly moisture, during which he spat out the eight spiders he swallowed sleeping. They didn't move, clearly deceased; it didn't spook him a bit, as is the norm living in an alcoholic's old, dingy den populated by spoiled food and empty Jack Daniels bottles laid sideways upon every square inch of flooring, roaches feasting away at unwrapped Chinese take-out boxes, and ball-length rats rummaging for termites in the creaky ebony masonry walls stitched thinly together by moth-eaten portraits of happier times.

The drunkard of a father was snoring on his rocking chair across the boob tube and rabbit ears, still playing the news on a loop, drowned out by lack of interest from Darius, because his worries centered around the big day. *Why did I agree to this criminal act? What would Ma think of this?* The boy brooded over tears.

Like clockwork, he shrugged it off and went about his morning ritual: dressing in yesterday's attire out of sheer laziness, brushing away the new poison (booze) bottles off the floor making a pathway to the kitchen, whipping up two slices of peanut butter toast, brewing a cup of parsimonious instant coffee, and gazing, in the eyelids at his father slumped in the rocking chair, before stepping outside towards Timber Street.

Paisley rose from the basement, dust-covered flooring, simultaneously recognizing something off that she couldn't explain through mere words. Paisley, thinking back to yesterday, pictured that crow perched on Sycamore in their yard and felt even more off—sensing the greater peril on the horizon, as she couldn't bring out the words to her brother—whom she wasn't aware of had already caught a glimpse himself—from trepidation, the foreboding emotion she tried desperately, yet failed miserably, to bury.

Moreover, the witch (their mother) seemed asleep, as evidenced by the lack of cacophony

from the walls bordering her room, which was atypical since she religiously awakens at the crack of dawn. Paisley met eyes with the distant, blurred background from spacing out briefly and agreed to herself that today would somehow be estranged entirely from any other period in her life, gulping as a fruitless means to soothe her chilling discomfort.

"Wes. Hey, Wes," Paisley quietly said as she tapped on Weston's shoulder. But he wouldn't budge.

She impatiently rushed to the basement sink, where a conveniently filled bucket of dirty, old water sat on the drain. She gingerly carried it a few yards back to her brother and dumped the waste, saturating him in a brown, gooey deluge.

"ARRRRRRRRGGGGGG! W-WHO THE- WHO THE FUCK-PAYYYYYYYSSSLAYYYYYY YAAAAAAAA BIYA-"

"Cut the shit, Wes!" Paisley asserted, using force to restrain the raging beast until his episode subsided. She thought his eyes looked like raging balls of red rings of fire spinning like a whirlpool in his jet-black iris' darkened oceans.

"We got business to deal with, so save the drama queen act for another day. Maxwell told us today, Wes—don't forget!"

Weston scoffed and snapped out of his fury spell; a minute later, he conceded to his sister, albeit to his stubborn disliking. Taking a deep, embittered breath, he rolled his eyes childishly before clearing his throat. "'Kay sis. I'm calm, 'kay? 'KAY??? But don't dare pull that kinda shit on me again, aight?

"Wes, you know I had no other choice. We're on the clock. You want to miss out on another opportunity to get our revenge? Or what, sleep until 3, smoke more crystal, and masturbate for 12 hours per usual?"

"Of course not, sis. I ain't 'bout that now. However, I was sleeping off this wicked comedown, or at least trying to. Think I smoked too much shit yesterday, y'know?

"Sure, ya not gonna get it. Unlike Maxwell and I, we're suffering at early bird hours. We need at least till noon to snap outta it, ya feel?"

Frowning, clearly displeased by her brother's sheer laziness, Paisley retorted, "Wes! Your ice addiction isn't my concern. Stop being such a baby. And you wonder why you weren't your mother's favorite—ever in the history of ever. You're a sloth. It's so pathetic.

"Now get up, because we need to leave pronto. Looking at my watch, it's already brunch hour: a quarter past 10, which means we'll be late at this rate. Does that mean anything to you? Wes, do you honestly care anymore?"

"Fine, fine. Aight! I get it." *Jeez, she's bitching like Mom for real, haha. Two identical twins in terms of personality and shit.*

Weston followed his sister to the wooden door leading out of their prison. It was up about ten steps of stairs and led into the main hallway connecting the kitchen and bedrooms, as their house was a one-story house. Weston took the honors on the first attempt of the knob.

"Huh, what the—

"ARGH! The damn thing won't fucking budge!"

Weston continues desperately pulling the handle. Paisley, seeing this, figures it all out.

"HEY! Wes, stop that right away! You're going to break the damn handle!"

Weston quickly responds, "Nadda sis, I almost got it. I can feel it. Hear that? It's nearly undone."

"Stop that," Paisley anxiously shouted, "you'll bust the knob before we can get it open. I'm serious, now quit that. I can see it coming loose."

Weston stops, albeit frustrated by his almost "successful effort", at least according to him. But Paisley proved correct when she swiftly pointed out the screws loosening from Weston's frantic pulling. The knob would have indeed separated in seconds if not for her intervention.

"FUCK! So she locked us in for good this time. Fuckin' biyatch!"

The two stand with their hands in their pockets for a few moments, thinking over their next move. Until Paisley, with her eagle eye, spotted a glass window near the sink.

"Aha, found it!"

"Huh?" Weston confusedly pressed.

"Dummy, look over there!" Paisley points towards the window, displaying the grass from the front yard.

Weston, embarrassed and bending to his knees in defeat, sheepishly looked in the same direction, before beaming in the eyes with insurmountable joy. "Yes, you're right! Goddammit, sis, you know how to remain calm in the tightest of spots."

You should heed my words more often, dummy, Paisley scorned under her breath.

They moved in unison to the glass window. Abruptly interrupting the ambient tranquility in the room, Weston smashed it hastily using a couple of spare buckets left in the drain. It took five seconds to crack open. Weston brushed off the weakened glass with his bare hands and jumped straight out like a wild Hyena.

Paisley laughed as if the most predictable action occurred right in front of her. She remarks, "Ah, yes, the boy on steroids hops out like a little scaredy cat, huh?"

"AH, shuddup, sis. I'm glad we outta that shitpad for a day.

"Now, how 'bout ya pull herself outta there. Don't want those rats feasting on ya."

Paisley, more carefully than her brother, put on some garden gloves conveniently on the sink counters and swiped away at the shards of glass. She can see shards poking out of her brother's limbs. She crawled out and picked them from his skin, ignoring the whines from him.

"Oh shit! DAMN, CUT IT OUT!"

"Hey, I'm saving your ass," Paisley rebuked. "Have a little more faith sometimes, capiche?"

Weston shrugged childishly, and both stopped to collect their breaths, until moving forward along the Timber Street sidewalk relative to their house. Their visages morphed into childlike surprise upon witnessing the vacancy of the street.

Perched atop a Sycamore branch, the black silhouette observed the Grizzly Riders walk their separate paths along Timber Street to the site of convergence. It squacks, witnessing the discomfort within each, curling its stick-shaped fear along its branch. "WHAAAAAAAT L-LOOOOOVELYSPECIMEEEEEN FOR TODAY," it commented. "IIIIIII SHAAAAALL HAAAAAAVE MYYYYYYYY FUUUUUUN WITH THEEEEEEM."

It once again departs the Sycamore branch, the very one it introspected on earlier concerning "bringing the others". It slyly followed the clueless teens to a branch several yards from their meetup site, where it observed and stirred the bonfire embers that provoked the endless fears from within.

"THEEEEEEYYYYYY SHAAAAAAAALLLLLLL EEEENJOOOOOOOY THIIIIS."

(Words: 2064)

one who pursues
CHAPTER THREE: THE GHOST TOWN
COMING SOON...